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Lifelong Learning: The Postmodern Condition of Education?

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Abstract: *In this paper, we argue that moves to reconfigure the education of adults as a dimension of lifelong learning signify a postmodern condition of education. In particular, we suggest that lifelong learning contributes to performativity and a loss of mastery, while at the same time opening up different possibilities for adult learners. This poses complex challenges to adult educators.*

Postmodern Framings and the Education of Adults

During the last ten years there has been much debate about the significance of postmodern framings for the study of and practices in the education of adults. This has taken a variety of forms across a spectrum ranging from enthusiastic support to outright hostility. For some, the postmodern is part of the globalisation of capitalist economic relations and the growth of post-industrial and consumer-oriented social formations within an information-rich environment enabled by new technologies. For others, it is a form of analysis associated with post-structuralism and deconstruction that brings to the fore the place of language and discourse and challenges foundational certainties in thought and action. Some view it as promoting individualism and lifestyle practices, linked to a revitalised neo-liberalism, marketised structures and a consumer society. Others argue that it provides a space for forms of radical and liberatory politics associated with new social movements and issues of gender, “race,” ethnicity and sexuality, which provide the space for a resistance free from the totalising discourse of the traditional left. We ourselves have played a role in these debates, suggesting some of the ways in which postmodern framings in general and specific post-structuralist analyses can open different spaces of investigation and suggest alternative, if less certain, perspectives to those embedded in neo-liberal, humanistic or radical theories of education. We would argue that at the very least the postmodern has provided a space for the development of social imaginaries, productive of a multiplicity and diversity of

meanings and possibilities through which to make sense of and engage with contemporary trends and processes, including that of lifelong learning.

Over the same period – and not coincidentally – “lifelong learning” has emerged as a powerful framing of policy and practice in many countries around the globe – indeed it may be thought of as one of many contemporary “policy epidemics” (Levin, 1998; Edwards & Usher, 2000). These policies and practices have been diverse and in most countries are still in the process of development. However, there would be considerable agreement with the argument that lifelong learning is providing a strategy (Griffin, 1999) through which post-school education and training, including the education of adults, is being, and is likely to continue to be, re-shaped.

The location of adult education within a post-modern space has been, and continues to be a troubled one. For many, the postmodern in all its various manifestations is viewed as undermining adult education’s traditional commitment to social action and historical alignment with working class organisations and other marginalised groups. For others, it undermines the commitment to liberal education, of learning for its own sake. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the postmodern provides a space for understanding and engaging with a fuller range of adult learning practices without the privileging of certain goals and purposes or bodies of knowledge as inherently worthwhile; providing possibilities therefore for recognising adult education as encompassing the multiplicity and diversity of practices of

adult learning that are such a striking characteristic of the contemporary scene.

Institutionalised education at all levels is itself becoming increasingly more diverse in terms of goals, processes, organisational structures, curricula and pedagogy. This both reflects, and contributes to, a breakdown of clear and settled demarcations between different sectors of education and between education and the lifeworld – with lifelong learning itself a manifestation of this dedifferentiation. The spread of lifelong learning has meant that institutionalised education can no longer claim a monopoly over learning on the grounds that it is a formally constituted field or through its epistemological policing. Once learning is recognised as located in a variety and diversity of social practices outside the institutional, a multiplicity of activities can involve learning and hence be deemed “educational.”

Thus, as well as designating a set of policies and practices, the term “lifelong learning” can also be understood as a metaphor that brings to the fore the simultaneous boundlessness of learning i.e. it is not confined by pre-determined outcomes, formal institutions and epistemological control, and its postmodern quality (i.e., its inherent discursivity, signifiatory power, and socio-cultural contextuality). The various phenomena subsumable under the heading “lifelong learning,” located in different discourses and played out through different social practices, signifies learning that could be inside or outside educational institutions, not necessarily within the modernist educational project, and not necessarily bounded by what educators would traditionally define as the transmission of “appropriate” and/or “worthwhile” knowledge.

The paper is in three sections. First, we locate lifelong learning within the framing of the postmodern condition, in particular the analysis offered by Lyotard (1984), and its consequences for knowledge and education. Second, drawing on recent work influenced by Nietzsche (Rikowski, 1999), a philosopher whose presence lives in the construction of post-structuralist framings, we wish to locate lifelong learning as a contemporary challenge to the notion of “mastery” embedded in modernist views of education. The final section will point forward towards our overall project, one that is subject to the processes outlined in this paper, and therefore per-

formative – albeit in complex ways – mediated through new technologies – but hopefully without mastery.

Performativity and Decentredness

The “postmodern” is at one and the same time an aspect of a changed and changing contemporary world and a way of understanding it. Reflexively, there is the attempt to provide a discourse for the world it seeks to explain, a discourse that highlights notions of decentring, ambivalence and contingency, a discourse that interlinks with the thrust of postmodernity in a socio-cultural and economic sense.

Lyotard (1984) argued that the grand narratives of modernity – the narratives of emancipation through scientific truth and social progress – now no longer have the ability to compel consensus. Whilst not rejected, they are increasingly greeted with incredulity and understood as masterful narratives and narratives of mastery. Their relative decline in influence and power has also thrown into doubt the subaltern narratives they have helped to shape, including the narratives that frame the educational project. Master signifiers then are generally no longer quite as masterful. Incredulity encompasses a questioning of any foundation or authorising centre and thus a scepticism that certain kinds of knowledge have canonical status – that some knowledge is *intrinsically* worthwhile and some is not. The decentring of the world thus also means a *decentring* of knowledge in a situation where knowledge is constantly changing and becoming more rapidly, almost overwhelmingly, available – itself mirroring the conditions of rapid change and bewildering instability of the postmodern “risk” society (Beck, 1992).

There is fairly widespread agreement that destandardisation, risk and individualisation are significant characteristics of all aspects of postmodern life. They are for example to be found in moves to increase the flexibility of the workplace and the workforce. As well as individuals, organisations are required to become reflexive, needing to learn in order to keep up with or be ahead of the bewildering pace of change and casting themselves as “learning organisations.” The workforce at all levels needs to “think” change – to have a positive attitude towards and be prepared to accept change – and in this situation “lifelong learning” becomes a significant

technology – of production, power, self and sign system (Foucault, 1988) - in helping to bring this about.

While we might not want to go as far as Baudrillard (1988), in characterising contemporary society as one totally enveloped by simulacra and hyper-reality, the analysis is nonetheless productive in problematising purely economic and humanistic readings of lifelong learning. The significance of signifying practices in a contemporary society, even one only partially hyperreal, involves forms of learning that barely feature in mainstream discourses of a “learning society.” Traditional forms of, and rationales for, pedagogy are subverted by, for instance, the spread of electronically mediated networks of learning. Who controls learning and indeed what constitutes a curriculum and a learning text becomes problematic and contested.

All this has paradoxical educational consequences. On the one hand, it has contributed to an erosion of the “liberal” curriculum and curiosity-driven research and an emphasis on learning opportunities oriented to performativity - learning that optimises the efficiency of the economic and social system. The modernist educational project is being reconstructed in terms of what it can contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of the socio-economic system, its task that of producing the knowledge specifically needed by, and those with the skills indispensable to, the contemporary globalised system. Here, performativity is located within wider discursive practices of economic globalisation, neo-liberal economics and market competitiveness where education, increasingly referred to as “lifelong learning,” becomes the means of attaining and maintaining the flexibility that is considered necessary in the face of the technological and socio-economic change required by these conditions. At the same time and in response to this context, educational institutions themselves become more managerial, corporatist and consumer oriented, more dominated by a managerial discourse and a logic of accountability and excellence.

On the other hand, however, the decentring of knowledge has resulted in a valuing of different sources and forms of knowledge (including knowledge that would not have once been considered worthwhile) and a corresponding devaluing of elitist

discipline-based knowledge. Subjects (in the sense of bodies of disciplinary and canonical knowledge) and their transmission seem less significant in relation to curriculum developments, such as work-based learning, and the development of new skills and capacities such as multi-disciplinarity, multi-literacies and “transcoding” (New London Group, 1995).

Stronach and MacLure (1997) argue that the contemporary scene is characterised by a certain “unruliness” of knowledge. Once knowledge is no longer an end in itself, its production and transmission ceases to be the exclusive responsibility of researchers and teachers and becomes as it were “up for grabs” epistemologically and within diverse contexts of practice. As Gibbons, *et al* (1994) point out, knowledge can no longer be regarded as discrete and coherent, its production defined by clear rules and governed by settled routines.

Another aspect of “unruliness” is traceable to the effect of information and communications technologies (ICTs). On the one hand, there is an acceleration of the individualisation of learning. Through the Internet, e-mail, CD-Roms and hypertext, possibilities are presented for individuals to access information, interact with it and other learners, and thus learn more flexibly and without the need to attend institutional centres or designated spaces of learning. With the breakdown in the hierarchy of, and the very distinction between, knowledge and information and with more people engaging in learning in diverse settings, what constitutes knowledge and worthwhile knowledge is further radicalised as an issue (Edwards & Usher, 2000).

The demand for performativity has itself contributed to this “unruliness” by subverting the very notion of knowledge as something that has to be validated by a “scientific” epistemology, thus undermining traditional knowledge production. In this sense, performativity simultaneously closes and opens possibilities. Performativity therefore – like lifelong learning and the postmodern of which it is an aspect - is itself paradoxical and has multiple significations. It contributes to both the strengthening and loosening of boundaries, to both an economy of the same and to an economy of difference and it is within these interlocking and inter-related economies that the lifelong learner is now located.

Without Mastery

The uncertainty of the epistemological markers for knowledge – pointed to in the calls for “standards” to be reasserted in certain educational contexts – that characterises the postmodern condition and the requirement for lifelong learning can be argued to signify a loss of mastery as a condition of education in the contemporary. Yet the notion of mastery is inscribed in modernist educational discourse. Education is a central modern practice, developing alongside and as part of the modern – Western, liberal, capitalist – nation state. Modernist education provides a training in certain forms of rationality, sensibilities, values, and subjectivities, in the process disembodimenting learners and the formation of bodies that takes place and reinscribing a mind/body dualism in its place. Thus, the more educated you are the more rational, the more “civilised.” The extension of education and educational opportunities has been both a symbol of progress in a modern nation state and has itself contributed to a certain kind of progress through the type of education provided. Clearly, there are aspects of lifelong learning which are still located in this educational paradigm.

Mastery of the “subject” is a key educational goal. One becomes an educated person, attends finishing school, gains a Masters degree, masters a body of disciplinary knowledge. Each is a form of completion, an “end” to learning and, in the case of a Masters degree an interesting expression of masculinist discourse – in mastering a subject (knowledge), one is able to master subjects in the sense of both self and others – women, colonies, workers. (One can imagine different connotations being given to the notion of a Mistress of Education, a perhaps more seductive relationship to knowledge). Yet education is in the business of uncertainty and is itself an uncertain business. Those who work in education have to become lifelong learners as much as those who come to learn and it is unsurprising that continuing professional development has grown as an area of practice.

It is precisely the possibilities for mastery that are thrown into question by postmodern framings. In this sense, the post in the postmodern signifies an uncertainty as to the directions of change or perhaps more importantly the levers through which change

can be directed, managed, regulated. Thus, the attempts at mastery only point to their inability to master. Modernity’s rush to the new in the service of progress and truth has always produced uncertainty, insecurity and ambivalence and this was recognised by Marx, Durkheim, Weber and many more contemporary sociological accounts. However, such accounts have often sought to find resolutions through which mastery could be reasserted and ambivalence and uncertainty overcome. What the postmodern does is surface the ambivalence of modernity and critiques any pretence of overarching or totalising schemes through which progress can be made, whilst also surfacing the exclusions these inscribe – hence the growing importance of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation alongside class. The more interesting postmodern thinking seeks to engage with the messiness and complexity of the contemporary condition, part of which is the loss of mastery.

There is no doubting the modernist thrust in much of the talk and policy surrounding lifelong learning. Yet it is premised on the uncertainty, insecurity and ambivalence that is a characteristic of postmodern analysis. Change and uncertainty require lifelong learning and “lifelong learning” is itself a signifier of the uncertainty and change of the contemporary. Rather than being a solution to the problem of change and uncertainty – a condition of mastery – lifelong learning can be understood differently – as fuelling the uncertainty to which it is the supposed response. Lifelong learning is not a condition of modernist mastery but rather of postmodernist ambivalence. Lifelong learning is not a secure ground upon which to stand, but is a process of constant travelling that is never completed and where destinations are always uncertain and constantly changing. It is a condition of constant apprenticeship (Rikowski, 1999) – mobile, flexible, adaptable – and it may be no accident that the latter is having a distinct revival in learning theory at this point in time (Ainley & Rainbird, 1999).

Lifelong Learning:

The Postmodern Condition of Education?

In this paper, we have offered pointers to a wider argument, one that we have pursued in a number of texts, both separately and together (Usher & Ed-

wards, 1994, Edwards, 1997, Usher, *et al*, 1997, Edwards & Usher, 2000). To date, we have yet to articulate fully a view of lifelong learning as part of the postmodern condition, even though such a position has been implicit in some of our earlier work. It is to such a project that this paper is an introduction or way in. There is a paradox in this of course, as in naming lifelong learning in this way we are in danger of providing a totalising explanation of its significance, thereby gaining mastery of its “true” meaning, even as we problematise such explanations. Lifelong learning, like the postmodern, denotes not only substantive practices but is also a signifier with multiple significations and no fixed referent. As such, it opens up a range of spaces even though any opening depends upon the closings that make the opening possible. It is through engaging with lifelong learning as the postmodern condition of education and as both inter-related sign and substance that we can engage with, and be engaged by those openings/closings and the ambivalence and troubled pleasures and resistances they provide.

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